

“People will often say hunting is the reason they own firearms, but the underlying structural reason, whether acknowledged or not, has more to do with white settler fears of racial rebellion. Indeed, the NRA—the most politically influential gun organization—isn’t powerful because it has a lot money to spend, but rather because it markets gun ownership as a means of reinforcing white settler sovereignty.”

Guns Don’t Kill People, Settlers Do:

The Second Amendment and the Myth of Defense

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Vintage Colt advertisement demonstrating the imbrication of policing and defense.

for the oppressed registers as illegitimate and irrational violence. With the same force, then, that we can acknowledge the illegitimacy of the notion of white settler self-defense, we should recognize the legitimacy of marginalized peoples' right to self-defense. As theorist Chad Kautzer argues, "our understanding of self-defense must, therefore, account for the transformative power of self-defense for oppressed groups as well as the stabilizing effect of self-defense for oppressor groups." What this looks like is, on the one hand, disempowering, delegitimizing, and disarming institutions of white settler violence such as the police, patriot, and other white-nationalist gun culture groups, and on the other, using a diversity of tactics to create and maintain community self-defense networks among marginalized communities. Community self-defense, as a theory and praxis, can help produce identities, relationships, and habits necessary not only to deter and prevent violence and build/protect power, but also to delegitimize the ideology of white victimization so crucial to white settlers' use of violence to defend their power. This framework reveals who is fighting a war of counterrevolution and who is fighting a war of liberation, whose fight is legitimate and whose is illegitimate.

In this way, community self-defense helps clear the way for matters of seeing where allegiances lie in a war that has been ongoing for over 500 years. For those picking up a gun to defend property that sits on stolen land and that has value through an economy built by and through stolen people, it becomes clear they are arming themselves to kill and die for colonialism and anti-Blackness. For those calling for peace between the oppressor and oppressed, community self-defense forces their hand, exposing where their allegiances actually lie: in support of colonial and racial violence. For those told that their struggle to exist, to be free, to control their own lands and bodies is irrational and illegitimate, they prove through community self-defense that it is irrational, let alone careless, to think that the structures of violence holding them captive or targeting them for elimination will be destroyed through peaceful negotiation and compromise.

COMMUNITY SELF-DEFENSE

While it may be easy to oppose right-wing white victimization and liberal support for state violence, it's still very hard for many to accept the premise that marginalized peoples, those targeted by such violence, have the right to use any means necessary to defend themselves and their communities. Yet we have to see, as Malcolm X made very clear, that the only people who have the moral authority to lay claim to the use of force as a means of self-defense are the people targeted by colonial violence in first place. The struggle to get free, gain control over one's life, and have a say in the governing of one's community is always a struggle of self-defense rather than aggression or provocation. The meanings of self-defense in settler society are purposely inverted to legitimate counterrevolutionary violence and to discredit the self-defense actions of communities struggling to get free.

Robert Williams emphasized this point over and over again while organizing armed community self-defense to protect the Black community against KKK violence in Monroe, South Carolina in the 1960s. In *Negroes with Guns*, Williams explains:

“The Afro-American militant is a ‘militant’ because he defends himself, his family, his home and his dignity. He does not introduce violence into a racist social system—the violence is already there and has always been there. It is precisely this unchallenged violence that allows a racist social system to perpetuate itself. When people say that they are opposed to Negroes ‘resorting to violence’ what they really mean is that they are opposed to Negroes defending themselves and challenging the exclusive monopoly of violence practiced by white racists.”

When a relationship between people is asymmetrical, meaning it is structurally impossible to rectify or reconcile, the violence that defends this power imbalance appears legitimate while anything that would take power away from the oppressor or build power

“Our nation was built and civilized by men and women who used guns in self-defense and in pursuit of peace.”

– Ronald Reagan

“If you are coming to the idea of resistance as a resolute no to the Empire, then armed self-defense is as much a yes to liberated life as the yes of community gardens.”

– Ashanti Alson

Many of the households where I grew up in rural Missouri have at least one good hunting rifle in their collections of firearms. Every November, most families here—usually the father and son, but sometimes the father and daughter—will go deer hunting, not only for sport but also for the meat it provides households. They will often say hunting is the reason they own firearms.

Several years ago, I was invited to go target shooting at the property of a long-time acquaintance. He was proud of his expansive and comfortable set-up: he owned several dozen acres of land in the country with a nice three-bed, two-bath home and a stable income to support it all. His property, in other words, allowed him to be a gracious host for friends, neighbors, and acquaintances looking to shoot guns, improve their marksmanship, and build community and comradery.

When I arrived, there were 15-20 men armed to the teeth, strutting around with ARs slung tightly around their chests and handguns of various calibers holstered on their belts. Their wives were inside preparing food and tending the kids. As the men—some dressed in army surplus gear, others still wearing their work clothes—blasted away at various targets, the property owner began talking to me about why he loved his home(stead) so much. It was, in his words, “out in the sticks, good and far away from all of that inner-city mayhem.” After showing me a sample of his extensive gun collection, spread out before everyone on the tailgate of his truck, he continued his white-to-white conservation with me:

of state violence among individual settlers and citizen militias. In other words, patriots believe the violence should be democratized and liberals believe it should be concentrated in the hands of state institutions. While one wants to stand alongside the police and military, the other wants the bloody work to be accomplished without getting their hands dirty. Avowed and disavowed to varying degrees, both support counterrevolutionary violence to protect settler democracy. In this way, liberals, despite their pacifist posturing, are not any less supportive of colonial violence than their gun-nut counterparts because they call for a strengthening of the settler state and a disarming of the populace, which will only make marginalized people more vulnerable to killings and incarceration.

This is a view that has the audacity and class privilege of asking marginalized people targeted by state violence, and its extended forms of vigilante violence, to appeal to the same state for protection. While patriots take up actual weapons to target marginalized people, liberals weaponize gun control policy to the same ends of putting people of color in body bags or cages. The only gun control that would reduce gun violence would be disarming the police, the military, domestic abusers, and anyone with ties to white nationalist and misogynist political groups, along with demilitarizing schools and campuses. Whether they are appealing to the Second Amendment or asking people to trust the authority of the police and military, white settlers on the Left or Right demonstrate that the violence they commit, fantasize about committing, or have no problem with the police and military committing for their protection is necessary for their redemptive vision of liberal democracy. It matters not if this vision is a return to when liberal democracy more forcefully upheld colonial and racial hierarchies, or some future point at which this violence and policing ensures genuine equality of opportunity for people believed to be formerly colonized and enslaved.

freedom-loving citizens to form militias to restore the founding colonialist vision of the United States.

For all the wrong reasons of preserving their power, such groups actually have a perceptive understanding of the Second Amendment as a law authorizing counterrevolutionary violence. For them, guns are not about hunting or even self-defense, but about the right to ensure colonial and racial rebellion is controlled and that state power is recaptured in ways that it abandons neoliberal multiculturalism for more direct forms of settler-colonial white-nationalist capitalism. Indeed, it is not surprising that Oathkeepers and Three Percenters show up to police Black rebellions or put down antifascist counterdemonstrations. They see themselves as an extension of the police, the National Guard, and border patrol. Like the KKK of yore, these militias, filled with current and former police and military, believe they fulfill the original function of the state—under the Obama years seen as liberal and weak—in putting down racial rebellions. Gun culture, then, serves as a symbolic yet very material compensation for the state's support of neoliberal multiculturalism and the dismantling of welfare capitalism. Just as credit is offered in place of decreased wages, gun culture supplies compensatory ammunition to bolster the value of whiteness in the face of deindustrialization, increased intra-settler inequality, and globalization's attack on U.S. nationalism.

ARMING THE POLICE, ARMING WHITE SUPREMACY

It is important not to forget that support for counterrevolutionary violence extends far beyond patriots and right-wing gun culture. Liberals who call for gun regulation but fully support the police and military and their work of upholding mass incarceration at home and imperial violence abroad support the same structures of violence celebrated by the gun-nuts such liberals love to disparage and against whom they define their commitments to nonviolence. The difference is a choice between a monopoly of state violence in repressive state apparatuses or the distribution

“Yeah, I have all this firepower because I gotta protect my property and family when, you know, shit hits the fan, and all them inner-city people dependent on government hand-outs are left high and dry and start coming out here where the pavement meets gravel looking to loot food and other things.”

It was clear he wanted me to understand that he had guns to defend against, in his eyes, Black people coming to loot his home in the event of a “societal collapse,” and that he'd be ready with an arsenal of firepower to repel them. That is, gun ownership for him was about using violence to defend his property-as-whiteness from racialized populations whom he recognized were deliberately excluded from the formal economy and corralled in inner-city ghettos. His guns were the lynchpin for maintaining this line between the “good guys” like himself—the productive worker, the property holder, the respectable law-abiding citizen—and a zombified surplus population marked for death. This metaphor is telling: of all the firearms he showed me that day, he was most proud of some recently purchased specialty ammunition with the tagline: “Supply yourself for the Zombie Apocalypse.” Guns and zombie rounds animated the fantasy of defending whiteness by mowing down a racialized surplus humanity on the gravel roads of rural Missouri.

I heard this fantasy many times growing up in such hyper-masculine spaces, in which it is taught that the man of the house has to be prepared to defend his home(stead) from perceived criminal (racial) threats and maintain order in his home. True men are providers and protectors; anything less, and you're an emasculated loser. In this way, the property holder was simply being a good patriot and male leader by preparing for the moment when, in his eyes, he would use guns in self-defense against the racialized poor. From this perspective, all the patriots out there that day sharpening their firearm skills claimed to be doing so for reasons of self-defense. Each saw himself as a Josey Wales,

John Wayne, or Dirty Harry, or (more recently) an American Sniper or Rick Grimes, neutralizing racialized criminal threats encountered on the Indian frontier or spilling out from the Black ghetto.

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rather because it markets gun ownership as a means of reinforcing white settler sovereignty. Gun ownership is about staving off the loss of the white settler's power, honor, and privilege, which the global economy no longer respects and the state, it is believed, tramples in its accommodating of the marginalized. Despite the rhetoric, gun ownership has never been about hunting or defending democracy against authoritarianism, which white settlers are ready to embrace if it maintains their power.

In other words, the fear of the dispossessed challenging their subjugation drives gun ownership and gun culture among white settlers in the United States—not hunting, a tyrannical government, or, as I argue, reasons of self-defense. American gun ownership has its structural roots in the desire to uphold and reproduce colonial and racial hierarchies and to maintain the power and benefits received from such hierarchies, putting guns in the hands of white settlers with fantasies of nostalgic redemption through violence. Make America Great Again, indeed.

United States sent shocks throughout the white-settler body politic. These rebellions ended in the settler state granting concessions to colonized and racialized groups in the form of civil rights legislation, the dismantling of legal forms of racial apartheid, and the overall turn away from overt, codified forms of white supremacy to new forms of colorblind racism. Black, Brown, and Native militancy terrified settlers, compelling concessions as a means to pacify their militant struggle.

It was these attempts of federal government to conditionally include marginalized groups that led white America, using a zero-sum logic, to feel betrayed and abandoned. As a result, white middle- and working-class settlers gave up defending the welfare state as long as it was also going to include nonwhites. In this moment when the state seems to accommodate nonwhites—an act that failed to respect, in the eyes of white America, the colonial and racial divisions binding together settlers—gun ownership became much more meaningful for white settlers looking to hold the line of these divisions where the state had, it was believed, given up doing so.

During Obama's presidency, this fear that the state had abandoned white settlers by catering to marginalized people had a resurgence. Gun purchases were at an all-time high and patriot community-building became widespread, which is to say, gun ownership and patriot communities were seen as necessary measures for saving the original and founding vision of a white settler republic from a federal government that was believed to have sided with the very people whose demands for equality would unravel the sovereignty and power of white settlers.

Militias such as the Oathkeepers and Three Percenters emerged during these years and embodied the view that it is the job of “true patriots” (white male settlers) to save white America from a state that has gone rogue in its perceived embrace of “open-borders” multiculturalism. The Constitution and the Second Amendment are sacred for such groups because they authorize

wasn't simply taxation without representation, but more broadly the right to expand its own empire rather than remain merely



another exploited colony—to form a state strong enough to defend the colonists' pursuit of wealth from Native and Black rebellion. Indeed, Jefferson makes this clear in the Declaration of Independence when he argues that the

Crown had prevented the colonies from clearing the lands west of the Appalachian Mountains of “merciless Indian savages” and encouraged slave insurrection in the colonies.

The rattlesnake represents a white settler body politic that feels continuously threatened and anxious about defending its power over conquered and subjugated populations. It claims to take up a position of self-defense when this position is actually one of stopping the efforts of marginalized people to free themselves from structures of violence. The fetish of Franklin's coiled rattler as the iconography of settlers coming together through counterrevolution suggests there is unity and strength precisely through this position of shared white victimization. If disjointed by cleavages such as class or gender, they will be overrun by the dispossessed, but if unified in their mutual opposition to the dispossessed, white settlers will flourish despite such intra-settler contradictions.

This fear of insurgency-from-below justifying the use of counterrevolutionary violence helps explain the emergence and proliferation of right-wing gun culture in the years following the 1960s to the present. As theorist Sylvia Wynter has argued, the global anti-colonial rebellions of the mid-20th century that empowered and inspired national liberation struggles in the

At its core, then, gun ownership for white settlers is about using tools of violence to defend the political category of white settler sovereignty, which is to say, using guns to harm, kill, or terrorize colonized and racialized people in order to keep them unfree—as their freedom means the dissolution of these categories of power and honor. Historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's recent book *Loaded* (2018) argues that the history of the Second Amendment and the right to bear arms was fundamentally the state-granted right of settlers to arm their households and form voluntary militias in order to seize Native land and/or police enslaved Black people. Gun ownership today maintains what Dunbar-Ortiz contends was the founding vision of the settler state to distribute its monopoly of violence to its settler-citizens in order to carry out campaigns of dispossession and secure white property against threats of rebellion:

“Settler-militias and armed households were institutionalized for the destruction and control of Native peoples, communities, and nations. With the expansion of plantation agriculture, by the late 1600s they were also used as ‘slave patrols,’ forming the basis of the U.S. police culture after enslaving people was illegalized.”

In fact, joining a militia was less of a right than a requirement of settlers; in some cases, particularly at the state level in the South preceding the Constitution, service in the militia or arming one's household was required by law. Dunbar-Ortiz explains this history:

“European settlers were required by law to own and carry firearms, and all adult male settlers were required to serve in the militia. Militias were also used to prevent indentured European servants from fleeing before their contracts expired, in which case they were designated ‘debtors.’ [. . .]. In 1727, the Virginia colony enacted a law requiring militias to create slave patrols, imposing stiff fines on white people who refused to serve.”

These state laws fed into the Second Amendment to enshrine the imperative of gun ownership at the federal level. Requiring participation in counterrevolutionary violence was thus written into the law directly. Today this duty to defend settler dominance continues not through state laws requiring militia membership but through informal gun ownership. The Second Amendment deputized settlers to use violence to steal land and people—in short, to expand empire.

Building on Dunbar-Ortiz's analysis of the Second Amendment, I want to suggest that we understand gun ownership as a material practice through which white settlers engage directly in the work of counterrevolutionary violence that consolidates and maintains U.S. liberal democracy. It is a way of strengthening settler democracy that promises empowerment and redemption. Firearms are the tools and symbols of a larger counterrevolutionary policing that binds settlers together despite contradictions of class in their mutual support of upholding colonial and racial hierarchies. Through gun ownership of today—what was, earlier, participation in militias—the white settler defends the state that in turn ensures his sovereignty and superiority.

In this way, the settler state depends on deputizing its settler-citizens to be the police of dispossessed populations, just as the settler relies on the state upholding his rights of property, or his “pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness.” This is why gun ownership is seen as fundamental to liberal freedoms. The Second Amendment is upstream from the other amendments precisely because counterrevolutionary policing maintains the public order of civil society in which liberal freedoms can flourish.

There are three conclusions, then, I would like to discuss that follow from the claim that Second Amendment-sponsored gun ownership in the United States is counterrevolutionary violence harmonizing intra-settler relations. The first is that self-defense belongs to the oppressed and never to the oppressor. From a structural perspective, there is no such thing as white settler self-

defense. The second is that gun culture from the 1960s onward serves as an important site at which settlers organize politically across class and gender lines to protect whiteness in response to marginalized peoples' demand for freedom and neoliberalism's attack on labor. The third is that the practice of community self-defense among those targeted by colonial violence radically undermines the ideology of white victimization through which counterrevolutionary violence is legitimated.

GUNS AND WHITE VICTIMIZATION

Perhaps the best example of how counterrevolutionary violence is coded as white settler self-defense is the now iconic Gadsden Flag. From its inception during the American Revolutionary War to its revival and proliferation in right-wing gun culture in the years following 9/11, the Gadsden Flag, with its image of a rattlesnake and phrase “Don't Tread on Me,” illustrates how the effort to maintain white settler power in the face of marginalized peoples' demand for freedom is branded as self-defense. The coiled rattler signifies a defensive and victimized position, but one that is deadly if provoked. The Gadsden Flag serves as an important symbol for those identifying as patriots, law-abiding gun-owners, and defenders of the Constitution because it supports a larger ideology that holds that white America is under attack by minorities (and the federal government taken over by minorities in the post-Civil Rights era) whose commitments to equality have turned into the discrimination against, exclusion of, and attacks on whiteness.



Some of the earliest versions of the Gadsden flag, as many patriots will mention, is Benjamin Franklin's drawing of the colonies as a snake divided into sections underwritten by the ultimatum of “join, or die.” Yet the tyranny the colonies were fighting against